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ABSTRACT

Student/initiates into visual, textual, and theoretical Web-based self-constructions do not necessarily wish to be gender, race, class, or ethnicity invisible or neutral. To best teach writing and critical thinking according to her departmental objectives, one instructor felt she had to broach student's assumptions about themselves as they textually--that is, graphically and lexically--constructed their online personas. These students grew up with electronic games, television, and the hypertext of soundbytes and other texting native to electronic media, yet their forays into Web authoring seem to emanate from the colloquial and familial. Students' academic Web pages and Web texts seek to instantiate identity by iconic visual representations. This paper, while focusing on gender, does not ignore the "simultaneity of oppression" in race, class, and age. The paper focuses on how students unconsciously apply the subtext of Camille Paglia's retrofeminism as critiqued by Teresa Ebert to their gendered Web pages; what unexamined theoretical beliefs students apply to their sites; and why it is important for instructors to introduce students to a myriad of visual and conceptual possibilities for their Web authoring in undergraduate writing courses. Additionally, it addresses who might benefit from students' forays into online sexing and commodification by framing student Web authorship within Judith Butler's and Rosemary Hennessy's materialist feminism. (NKA)

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Assessing Sex: Who Benefits from De-Gendered Writing and Visual Rhetoric in the Computer-Mediated Classroom?

Katherine V. Wills

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Conference on College Composition and Communication

Denver, CO (March 14-17, 2001)

Katherine V. Wills

"Assessing Sex: Who Benefits from De-Gendered Writing and Visual Rhetoric in the Computer-Mediated Classroom?,"

Research in the human/technology interface questions to what degree student homepages and sites limit or express cues of age gender, race, socio-economic status, and ethnicity (Sims, 41; Jones, 35-36; Hansen, 202 and 204 all in Sullivan's Electronic literacies in the Workplace). Researchers also note that networked communications mask differences in race, class, and gender thereby reducing marginalization (Hawisher and Selfe, Flores, and Baker and Kemp in Sullivan). We can surmise, as Patricia Sullivan does that networked environments "foster egalitarian participation [that] extends beyond individuals and into the social context that surrounds" communities and communication (203 Sullivan).

Networked student environments do foster involvement in ways of communicating and in communities that students may not have otherwise experienced. However, as our two previous presenters in this session show, student/initiates into visual, textual, and theoretical web-based self-constructions do not necessarily wish to be gender, race, class, or ethnicity invisible or neutral.

I teach the student webauthoring of webpages and webtexts adjunct to composition courses. I gleaned that my students sex or gender their texts along predictable lines. In order to best teach writing and critical thinking according to my departmental objectives,

I felt I had to broach student assumptions about themselves as they textually--that is, graphically and lexically—constructed—that is, consciously, but mostly unconsciously, their online personas. They grew up with electronic games, television, and the hypertext of soundbytes, informercials, and other texting native to electronic media; yet their forays into webauthoring seem to emanate from the colloquial and familial. Students' academic webpages and webtexts seek to instantiate identity by iconic visual representations. Iconize the carnal. Affirm reality by the image. Make flesh into word. Make flesh into gif.

This presentation, while focusing on gender, does not ignore the "simultaneity of oppression" in race, class, and gender and age issues concerns (238 Brewer in Hennessy & Ingraham). Instead the presentation focuses on

- How students unconscious apply the subtext of Camille Paglia's retrofeminism as critiqued by Teresa Ebert to their gendered webpages
- what unexamined theoretical beliefs students apply to their sites,
- and why it is important for instructors to introduce students to a myriad of visual and conceptual possibilities for their webauthoring in undergraduate writing courses.

The networked class becomes a site of identity authentication and even the formation of identity politics thereby portray students ideas in the familiar, the conventional, and the objectified textualizations until or unless they are introduced into alternative possibilities for creative and expressive thought.

Moving beyond the descriptive, (such as here are my student sites and here is what they look like and here is what I think it means), this session suggests ways and to complicate and enlarge students' web-based representations, self-images, and education.

Additionally, this presentation addresses who might benefit from students' foray into online sexing and commodification by framing student web authorship within Judith Butler's and Rosemary Hennessy's materialist feminism.. Hegemonic, patriarchal authority benefits by the repetition of the unexamined cultural gendering of student work. Students benefit by reconsidering their gendering of their own texts. Whatever texts construct, they are encouraged to think and write teleologically and reflectively in addition to habituated and culturally prescribed .

When neophyte web authors create a homepage, they initiate a process of naming: a visual baptism by color, shape, and form. Students often ground their pages within the constraints of binary gender roles of male and female. Judith Butler in *Bodies that Matter* calls the process girling (and I add boying). Girling or boying is the iterative, formative manifestation of femininity and masculinity through cues. Concretely in a culturally context, this may take the form of naming a girl Mary and a boy Bill, the dressing of girls in pink and boys in blue, the style of hair, and the tone of voice one uses to towards a girl or boying. In the context of student web sites, students rely on conventional girling and boying standards and do not easily move out of these ingrained ideals unless shown and encourage to do so; and often not then. Students resist creating visual representations that do not conform to images of perceived normalcy. For the most part, to date, humans find it difficult to change either XY sex determinants or the initial

girling and boying by families. What can be influenced, however, is the intellectual breadth with which gender can be understood and expressed by web authors. Sex can be reinscribed as gender and unbound from irreducible material binaries of male and female. Students are unaware or unwilling to engage in freeplay or choice in their gender imaginary. They rely, for the most part on conventional icons and images. I hear the voices of a few of my students who resist the notion of anything but the need for two sexes or an understanding of two sexes. Who benefits with a complicated view of gender? Far from being a humanities preoccupation, gender studies and the fluidity of gender aids in studies in biology, psychology, sociology, medicine, law and chemistry informatics. Computer and technological intersection with allows for visual representations and mutations. The hybridity of the Hellenic hermaphrodite can be manipulated. Not a mere exercise in ideologies, visualization and play helps students understand the documented human history that does not fit within normative heterosexuality. These concepts help students understand that sexuality need not be only determined but can be constructed and freed.

Instructors expand students' conceptual frameworks in several ways by encouraging alternative self-representations to students' webwork before inscribing gendered binary roles: man or woman. None of these suggestions are meant to erase identity or as Butler says "get over yourself" (117), but to consider, and perhaps overcome cultural and intellectual constraints, normative and heterosexist frameworks by using three following strategies:

- students can apply abstract self-constructions: bamboo, fractals

- students become better readers of coded messages by examining ambiguous or intersexed sites

- students question boundary and disciplinary assumptions in their work.

"...bodies that matter is not a pun; for to be material means to materialize, where the principle of that materialization is precisely what matters... to matter, to mean, to materialize" (34, Butler in *BodiesThat Matter*).

My students come from Midwestern, Bible belt, urban universities Both male and female student web and home pages far from seeking to be devoid of degendered socio-cultural tags, often reveal what Teresa Ebert calls third wave retrofeminism in the style of Camille Paglia, Susan Faludi and Rebecca Walker (Ebert). Next I will situate student texts within this retrofeminism as described by Ebert *in Ludic Feminism.*

This student constructed web-based images of gendered male/female/ and not predominately not intersexed reinforce bourgeois patriarchal capitalism. (Let me add here that I avoid theoretical jargon with my student initially and teach using implicit rather than explicit theoretical concepts.

Paglia's retrofemisnim and its expression in student sites assumes the following:

- rejection of feminism as victim feminism (267 Ebert)

  gender issues viewed as problems a bygone era in the 1960s

- an anti-emancipatory feminist manqué in which women (and men) are ruled by the "intractable physical laws of their own bodies" and a biological determinism

- A history of civilization based on ejaculation and the male drive (269)

  Age, experiences, or lack thereof of general population of 17-23 year-olds

- Tendency to support backlash feminism

  Some students have been pre-warned and prepared that they will be in secular institution with an agenda and need to be on guard and to challenge what they Percy and ideologies different from their own).

  In a class where the range of age for students is 17-24 in American culture, the

- Conviction that there is no oppression (267 Ebert)

Reifying experience in the body in order to bypass historical and materialist situatedness and serves as Ebert says, a "alibi for patriarchal capitalism." (268). For retrofeminists, like many of my students, Madonna (Wonder Woman, Spider Woman) as the true feminist. "Madonna has a far profounder vision of sex... both the animality and the artifice... {she} embodies the eternal values of beauty and pleasure" (NYT 1990 "Madonna: Finally a Real Feminist" in Ebert 267).

I interviewed student and webauthor Joyce Lockard on her rationale for constructing her site. Even after class discussions on visual rhetoric and examination of numerous other student and educational and workplace sites, she elected to construct her site as a gendered, retrofeminist expression of the roles and activities of her daily life.

"I wanted my site to show what was going on in my life. I don't know why I did it. My sister was getting married and I am getting married in a year." Students argue that the efforts of their agency in web authority are not an act of submission to the hegemonic roles.

Rosemary Hennessy notes that heterosexual marriage and family are highly relevant to radical sexual politics in that the depiction of herteronormative images ignores possibilities of alternative domestic partnerships (67, P&P, Hennessy)

Students benefit when they can apply their agency consciously to visual construction. They can move beyond agency annealed to the body and their own pleasures and desires and limited to binary gender: Catherine Mac Kinnon succinctly describes the agency of the retrofeminist man or woman: "The sexual-agency people [of the retrofeminists] don't want equality—they just want better orgasms" (quoted from Esquire in Ebert, 267).

Paglia et al and many of my students arrive and construct identity with the belief that gendered (or raced, classes etc) does not really oppression exist. Students insist

their web sites do not express their complicity in the hegemonic patriarchal milieu in which they were socialized, but their free choice. Paglia's vision of feminism

> ...valorizes the binaries of feminine and masculine, reifies highly individualistic libertarianism, privileges pleasure ("beauty") and consumption (commodification) (268 Ebert).

The pleasure experience itself must be commodified as a discrete entity and alienated from the perceived wholesomeness of their lives. Pleasure becomes an informationalized "pleasure byte" that can be traded with peers as cultural currency. Unlike Paglia, who dismisses the collective identity: "I dispose the idea of community—period" (as quoted in the Advocate to Steven Petrow, 268, Ebert), students often create sites for the acceptance by or attraction of like-minded communities. Students view their websites to move beyond Paglia's "fem-mystique" to critically producing a socially transformative political practice" (270).

The materialist feminism of Rosemary Hennessy offer students a path beyond the retrofeminism they portray in their webauthoring. The students' own iconography helps them visualize how they have written themselves as commodities.

Students who use identity politics in web sites and ignore oppression and encourage the race, class, and gender oppression that the commodfication of their identity asserts graphically. Students can see how they fetishize the homepage position themselves within capitalism. While students often will not ideologically resist the

notion of capitalism, they resist the notion that they are not unique or individual and a product of capital. Identity politics and is totally compatible with market capitalism (269). In the increasingly corporatized academic classroom studies have difficulty both seeing and not seeing themselves as commodities.

Why is teaching an awareness and of gender (and race and class etc) concept crucial o the instruction of student web designers? Althusser agues that the Lacanian imaginary is that image or representation of reality which masks the historical and material conditions of life. The adherence to fossilized heterosexual imaginary conceals the operation of heterosexuality as an organizing institution. Heterosexuality circulates rigid and naturally occurring to the exclusion of other epistemological or ontological possibilities. Students and communities benefit by being skeptical about normative assumptions about gender and recognizing that the classroom is politically situated:

the flatness of the earth

authority of the church

biological sexing humans by men

authority of the medicine men

irreducibility of the tripartite atom (neutron proton)

authority of science.

Opening up this mental and physical landscape to other possibilities unquestioned, while gender is understood as socially constructed and central to the organization of everyday life. Gender imaginary is often premised on heteronormative

assumptions. Ingrahams argues that the materialist conditions of capitalist patriarchal societies are more linked to institutional heterosexuality.

"As Althusser has argued, "A word or concept (and I add image or homepage) cannot be considered in isolation; it only exits in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used is problematic.' To determine a text's problematic is to reveal another logic circulating beneath the surface" (279) What is missing from the homepages? The unsaid text reveals of what is left out.

"...sex must be scrutinized in relation to the interests that its definition furthers...what ends are served by constructing sex into biological categories of female and male? (286) (second waves Furies collective, Rita Mae Brown,. Redstockings, Rich and Witt)

Normative cultural valorizations of gender, race, class, and age sustain existing inequities. Students prefer the comfortablity of the known and familiar rather seeking challenging or inventive web sites. To degender and resex or multisex images is a first step in freeing the imagination for freeing the mind-- a goal I have for my students' liberal education—free the imagination, to move from binaries of gender to multiple possibilities.

- Degendering, regendering internal and external landscapes might include images of the "new Families' headed by women, gays, and partners
- An awareness of the commodification of self and the website as it relates use of

space and topics: iteration and consumption of extant cultural markers.

- An examination of basic social relations under late capitalism

Ultimately both students of the hegemony, students not of the hegemony, and the proponents of the hegemony benefit by degendering and regendering students understanding. Those who argue that complicating views of gender or race does not benefit anyone except certain ideological groups, miss the point that more understanding, more communication, more reflection benefits everyone.

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